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CH'AN NEWS LETTER

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The Essentials of Ch'an Practice

by Master Hsu-yun

LEVEL
ONE

LECTURES ON THE METHODS OF PRACTICE IN THE CH'AN HALL

1. Introduction:

Many people come to ask me for guidance. This makes me feel ashamed. Everyone works so hard — splitting firewood, hoeing the fields, carrying soil, moving bricks — and yet from morning to night not putting down the thought of practicing the Path. Such determination for the Path is touching. I, Hsu-yun, repent my inadequacy on the Path and my lack of virtue. I am unable to instruct you and can use only a few sayings from the ancients in response to your questions. There are four prerequisites concerning methods of practice: (1) Deep faith in the law of cause and consequence; (2) Strict observance of precepts; (3) Immovable faith; (4) Choosing a Dharma door method of practice.

2. Essentials of Ch'an Practice:

Our everyday activities are executed within the Path itself. Is there anywhere that is not a place for practicing the Path? A Ch'an Hall should not even be necessary. Furthermore, Ch'an practice is not just sitting meditation. The Ch'an Hall and Ch'an sitting meditation are for sentient beings with deep karmic obstructions and shallow wisdom.

When one sits in meditation, one must first know how to regulate the body and mind. If they are not well regulated, then a small harm will turn into an illness and a great harm will lead to demonic entanglements. This would be most pitiable. Walking and sitting meditation in the Ch'an Hall are for the regulation of body and mind. There are other ways to regulate the body and mind, but I will talk about these two fundamental methods.

When you sit in the lotus position, you should sit naturally straight. Do not push the waist forward purposely. Doing so will raise your inner heat, which later on could result in having sand in the corner of your eyes, bad breath, uneasy breathing, loss of appetite, and in the worst case, vomiting blood. If dullness or sleepiness occur, open your eyes wide, straighten your back and gently move your buttocks from side to side. Dullness will naturally

vanish. If you practice with an anxious attitude, you will have a sense of annoyance. At that time you should put everything down, including your efforts to practice. Rest for a few minutes. Gradually, after you recuperate, continue to practice. If you don't do this, as time goes on you will develop a hot-tempered character, or, in the worst case, you could go insane or fall into demonic entanglements.

There are many experiences you will encounter when sitting Ch'an, too many to speak of. However, if you do not attach to them, they will not interfere with you. This is why the proverb says: "See the extraordinary yet do not think of it as being extraordinary, and the extraordinary will retreat." If you encounter or perceive an unpleasant experience, take no notice of it and have no fear. If you experience something pleasant, take no notice of it and don't give rise to fondness. The *Surangama Sutra* says: "If one does not think he has attained a supramundane experience, then this is good. On the other hand, if one thinks he has attained something supramundane, then he will attract demons."

3. How to Start the Practice: Distinction Between Host and Guest:

How should one begin to practice? In the *Surangama* assembly, Kaundinya the Honored One mentioned the two words "guest" and "dust." This is where beginners should begin their practice. He said, "A traveler who stops at an inn may stay overnight or get something to eat. When he is finished or rested, he packs and continues his journey, for he does not have time to stay longer. If he were the host, he would have no place to go. Thus I reason: he who does not stay is called a guest because not staying is the essence of being a guest. He who stays is called a host. Again, on a clear day, when the sun rises and the sunlight enters a dark room through an opening, one can see dust in empty space. The dust is moving but the space is still. That which is clear and still is called space; that which is moving is called dust because moving is the essence of being dust."

Guest and dust refer to illusory thoughts, whereas host and space refer to self-nature. That the permanent host does not follow the guest in his comings and goings illustrates that permanent self-nature does not follow illusory thoughts in their fleeting rise and fall. Therefore it was said, "If one is unaffected by all things, then there will be no obstructions even when one is constantly surrounded by things." The moving dust does not block the clear, still empty space; illusory thoughts which rise and fall by themselves do not hinder the self-nature of Suchness. Thus it was said, "If my mind does not arise, all things are blameless." In such a state of mind, even the guest does not drift with illusory thoughts. If he understands space and dust, illusory thoughts will no longer be hindrances. It is said that when one recognizes an enemy, there will be no more enemy in your mind. If one can investigate and understand all this before starting to practice, it is unlikely that one will make serious mistakes.

4. Hua-t'ou and Doubt:

The ancient patriarchs pointed directly at Mind. When one sees self-nature, one attains Buddhahood. This was the case when Bodhidharma helped his disciple to calm his mind and when the Sixth Patriarch spoke only about seeing self-nature. All that was necessary was the direct understanding and acceptance of Mind and nothing else. There was no such thing as investigating hua-t'ou. More recent patriarchs, however, saw that practitioners could not throw themselves into practice with total dedication and could not instantaneously see their self-nature. Instead, these people played games and imitated words of wisdom, showing off other people's treasure and imagining it was theirs. For this reason, later patriarchs were compelled to set up schools and devise specific ways to help practitioners, hence the method of investigating hua-t'ou.

There are many hua-t'ous, such as "All dharmas return to one, where does this one return to?" "What was my original face before I was born?" and so on.

The most common one, however, is "Who is reciting the Buddha's name?"

What is meant by hua-t'ou? Hua means the spoken word; t'ou means the head or beginning, so hua-t'ou means that which is before the spoken word. For example, reciting Amitabha Buddha is a hua, and hua-t'ou is that which precedes one's reciting the Buddha's name. The hua-t'ou is that moment before the thought arises. Once the thought arises, it is already the tail of the hua. The moment before the thought has arisen is called non-arising. When one's mind is not distracted, is not dull, is not attached to quiescence, or has not fallen into a state of nothingness, it is called non-perishing. Singlemindedly and uninterruptedly, turning inward and illuminating the state of non-arising and non-perishing is called investigating the hua-t'ou or taking care of the hua-t'ou.

To investigate the hua-t'ou, one must first generate doubt. Doubt is like a walking cane for the method of investigating hua-t'ou. What is meant by doubt? For example, one may ask, "Who is reciting the Buddha's name?" Everyone knows that it is he himself who is reciting the name, but is he using his mouth or mind? If it is his mouth, then after the person dies and the mouth still exists, how come the dead person is unable to recite Buddha's name? If it is the mind, then what is the mind like? It cannot be known. Thus there is something one does not understand, and this gives rise to a slight doubt regarding the question of "who."

This doubt should never be coarse. The finer it is the better. At all times and in all places, one should singlemindedly watch and keep this doubt, and keep it going like a fine stream of water. Do not get distracted by any other thought. When the doubt is there, do not disturb it. When the doubt is no longer there, gently give rise to it again. Beginners will find that it is more effective to use this method when stationary rather than when moving; but you should not have a discriminating attitude. Regardless of

whether your practice is effective or not or whether you are stationary or moving, just singlemindedly use the method and practice.

In the hua-t'ou, "Who is reciting the Buddha's name?" The emphasis should be on the word "who." The other words serve to provide a general idea, just like in asking, "Who is dressing?" "Who is eating?" "Who is moving their bowels?" "Who is urinating?" "Who is ignorantly fighting for an ego?" "Who is being aware?" Regardless of whether one is walking, standing, sitting, or reclining, the word "who" is direct and immediate. Not having to rely on repetitive thinking, conjecture, or attention, it is easy to give rise to a sense of doubt.

Hence, hua-t'ou's involving the word "who" are wonderful methods for practicing Ch'an. But the idea is not to repeat, "Who is reciting Buddha's name?" like one might repeat the Buddha's name itself; nor is it right to use reasoning to come up with an answer to the question, thinking that this is what is meant by having doubt. There are people who uninterruptedly repeat the phrase, "Who is reciting the Buddha's name?" They would accumulate more merit and virtue if they repeatedly recited Amitabha Buddha's name instead. There are others who let their minds wander, thinking that that is the meaning of having doubt, and they end up more involved in illusory thoughts. This is like trying to ascend but descending instead. Be aware of this.

The doubt that is generated by a beginning practitioner tends to be coarse, intermittent and irregular. This does not truly qualify as a state of doubt. It can only be called thoughts. Gradually, after the wild thoughts settle and one has more control, the process can be called *ts'an* (*ts'an* means to investigate or look into). As one's cultivation gets smoother, the doubt naturally arises without one's actively inducing it to. At this point one is not aware of where one is sitting. One is not aware of the existence of a body or mind or environment. Only the doubt is there. This is a true state of doubt.

Realistically speaking, the initial stage cannot be considered cultivation. One is merely engaging in illusory thoughts. Only when true doubt arises by itself can it be called true cultivation. This moment is a crucial juncture, and it is easy for the practitioner to deviate from the right path:

(1) At this moment it is clear and pure and there is an unlimited sense of lightness and peace. However if one fails to fully maintain one's awareness and illumination (awareness is wisdom, not delusion; illumination is samadhi, not disorder), one will fall into a light state of mental dullness. If there is an open-eyed person around, he will be able to tell right away that the practitioner is in this mental state and hit him with the incense stick, dispersing all clouds and fog. Many people become enlightened this way.

(2) At this moment it is clear and pure, empty and vacuous. If it isn't, then the doubt is lost. Then it is "no content," meaning one is not making an effort to practice anymore. This is what is meant by "the cliff with dry wood" or "the rock soaking in cold water." In this situation the practitioner has to "bring up." "Bring up" means to develop awareness and illumination. It is different from earlier times when the doubt was coarse. Now it has to be extremely fine — one thought, uninterrupted and extremely subtle. With utter clarity, it is illuminating and quiescent, unmoving yet fully aware. Like the smoke from a fire that is about to go out, it is a narrow stream without interruption. When one's practice reaches this point, it is necessary to have a diamond eye in the sense that one should not try to "bring up" anymore. To "bring up" at this point would be like putting a head on top of one's head.

Once a monk asked Ch'an master Chao-chou, "What should one do when not one thing comes?" Chao-chou replied, "Put it down." The monk asked, "If not one thing comes, what does one put down?" Chao-chou replied, "If it cannot be put down, take it up." This dialogue refers precisely to this kind of situa-

tion. The true flavor of this state cannot be described. Like someone drinking water, only he knows how cool or warm it is. If a person reaches this state, he will naturally understand. If he is not at this state, no explanation will be adequate. To a sword master you should offer a sword; do not bother showing your poetry to someone who is not a poet.

5. Taking Care of Hua-t'ou and Turning Inward to Hear One's Self-nature:

Someone might ask, "How is Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara's method of turning inward to hear self-nature considered investigating Ch'an?" I have previously explained that taking care of hua-t'ou is being, moment after moment, with only one thought, singlemindedly shining the light inward on "that which is not born and not destroyed." Inward illumination is reflection. Self-nature is that which is not born and not destroyed. When "hearing" and "illuminating" follow sound and form in the worldly stream, hearing does not go beyond sound and seeing does not go beyond form. However, when one turns inward and contemplates self-nature against the worldly stream, and does not pursue sound and form, then he becomes pure and transparent. At that time "hearing" and "illuminating" are not two different things.

Thus we should know that taking care of the hua-t'ou and turning inward to hear self-nature does not mean using our eyes to see and our ears to hear. If we use our ears to hear or our eyes to see, then we are chasing sound and form. As a result we will be affected by them. This is called submission to the worldly stream. If one practices with one thought only, singlemindedly abiding in that which is not born and not destroyed, not chasing after sound and form, with no wandering thoughts, then one is going against the stream. This is also called taking care of the hua-t'ou or turning inward to hear one's self-nature. This is not to say you should close your eyes tightly or cover your ears. Just do not generate a mind of seeking after sound and form.

6. Determined to Leave Samsara and Generating a Persevering Mind:

In Ch'an training the most important thing is to have an earnestness to leave birth and death and to generate a persevering mind. If there is no earnestness to leave birth and death, then one cannot generate the "great doubt" and practice will not be effective. If there is no perseverance in one's mind, the result will be laziness, like a man who practices for one day and rests for ten. The practice will be incomplete and fragmented. Just develop a persevering mind and when great doubt arises, vexations will come to an end by themselves. When the time comes, the melon will naturally depart from the vine.

I will tell you a story. During the Ch'ing dynasty in the year of K'eng Tse (1900) when the eight world powers sent their armies to Peking, the Emperor Kuang-hsu fled westward from Peking to Shen Hsi province. Everyday he walked tens of miles. For several days he had no food to eat. On the road, a peasant offered him sweet potato stems. After he ate them, he asked the peasant what they were because they tasted so good. Think about the Emperor's usual awe-inspiring demeanor and his arrogance! How long do you think he could continue to maintain his imperial attitude after so long a journey on foot? Do you think he had ever gone hungry? Do you think he ever had to eat sweet potato stems? At that time he gave up all of his airs. After all, he had walked quite a distance and had eaten stems to keep from starving. Why was he able to put down everything at that time? Because the allied armies wanted his life and his only thought was to save himself. But when peace prevailed and he returned to Peking, once again he became proud and arrogant. He didn't have to run anymore. He no longer had to eat any food that might displease him. Why was he unable to put down everything at that time? Because the allied armies no longer wanted his life. If the Emperor always had an attitude of running for his life and if he could turn such an attitude toward the path

of practice, there would be nothing he could not accomplish. It's a pity he did not have a persevering mind. When favorable circumstances returned, so did his former habits.

Fellow practitioners! Time is passing, never to return. It is constantly looking for our lives. It is more frightening than the allied armies. Time will never compromise or make peace with us. Let us generate a mind of perseverance immediately in order to escape from birth and death! Master Kao-fung (1238-1295) once said, "Concerning the practice, one should act like a stone dropping into the deepest part of the pool — ten thousand feet deep — continuously and persistently dropping without interruption toward the bottom. If one can practice like this without stopping, continuously for seven days, and still be unable to cut off one's wandering, illusory thoughts and vexations, I, Kao-fung, will have my tongue pulled out for cows to plow on forever." He continued by saying, "When one practices Ch'an, one should set out a certain time for success, like a man who has fallen into a pit a thousand feet deep. All his tens of thousands of thoughts are reduced to one — escape from the pit. If one can really practice from morning to dusk and from night to day without a second thought, and if he does not attain complete enlightenment within three, five, or seven days, I shall be committing a great lie for which I shall have my tongue pulled out for cows to plow on forever." This old master had great compassion. Knowing that we would probably be unable to generate such a persevering mind, he made two great vows to guarantee our success.

to be continued

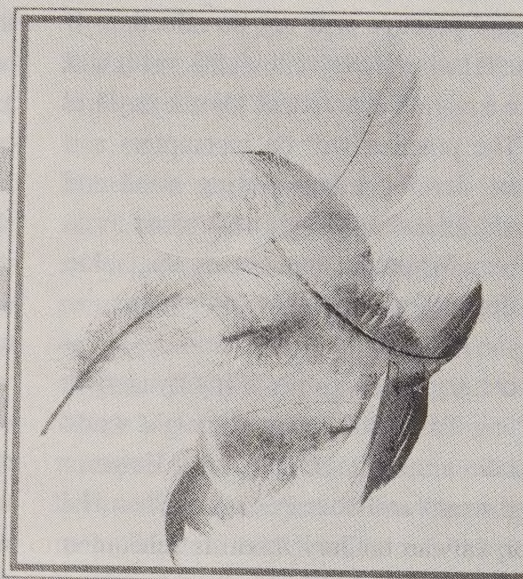
Catching



A ZEN RETREAT

WITH MASTER

SHENG YEN



a feather
on a fan

John Crook

Professor John Crook has written a new book, *Catching a Feather on a Fan*, published by Element Press. *Catching a Feather on a Fan* is a fascinating account of a Ch'an (or Zen) retreat in Wales conducted by Master Sheng-yen (Shih-fu). It relates the day to day experience of an intensive retreat. Shih-fu's talks are included together with insightful commentaries by Professor Crook. Here is an opportunity to explore the meaning of Ch'an as it is experienced by actual retreat participants.

NEWS ITEM

The Center's annual outing took place on July 14. About 50 of us went to the Gateway National Recreation Area in Staten Island in the morning. The children had a lot of fun at the beach. In the afternoon we visited the Jacques Marchais Center of Tibetan Art, also located in Staten Island. It was an enjoyable day for both children and adults.



Shih-fu left for Taiwan on July 8. He is scheduled to return in early October. He is tentatively scheduled to give lectures in Toronto, Canada; Atlanta, Georgia; Miami, Florida; New Orleans, Louisiana; Austin and Dallas, Texas, and San Jose, Costa Rica. Details of these lectures will be available in the next newsletter.

While Shih-fu is away, Master Jen Chun and Prof. Li will give lectures on Sundays. The schedule is as follows:

Master Jen Chun on "Fulfilling Vows by Relying on Emptiness," Chapter 9 of the *Golden Light Sutra*:

August 4, 25, September 22, 29 and October 6.

Prof. Li on the *Heart Sutra*:

August 11, 18, September 8 and 15.

There is a three-day retreat beginning on August 31, 8 a.m. to September 2, 8 p.m. \$30 for members and \$45 for non-members. Please call to register.

On July 19 Mrs. Pei-chang Chen Li, Prof. Li's wife, passed away peacefully at Overlook Hospital in New Jersey. She had been seriously ill for the last two years, but her mind and spirit remained calm and serene. She exemplified the teaching of the Middle Path. We join Prof. Li in remembrance of his wife and in his dedication to the spreading of Buddhadharma.



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